"The Serpent in Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religious Thought: Toward an Ophidian Interpretation"

Author: *Stefano Sannino*
Institution: The Ophidian Synodus
Email: info.thesynodus@gmail.com

Abstract:

The serpent is one of the most persistent and multiform symbols in the religious imagination of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds. From the *tannîn* of Genesis to the *drákon* of Greek tradition, from the monstrous forms of Echidna and Typhon to the ambivalent figure of the *Leviathan*, serpent imagery evolves through a spectrum that ranges from cosmic threat to divine mediation. This article examines the philological, mythological, and theological dimensions of serpent symbolism, arguing that the apparent dualism between "benevolent" and "malevolent" serpent forms derives not from inherent opposition, but from cultural reinterpretation across epochs. By analysing primary sources from the Hebrew Bible, Greek literature, Egyptian cultic narratives, and late antique syncretic traditions, the study proposes that the serpent served as a foundational figure for expressing transformation, divine presence, cosmic tension, and metaphysical power.

The work concludes by suggesting that modern Ophidian theology, as articulated in the contemporary movement of Ophidism, emerges organically from this long lineage, reframing the serpent not as adversary but as the icon of Unity and Becoming.

Keywords: serpent symbolism, Ophidism, Leviathan, Typhon, drákon, Mediterranean religions, monotheism, anthropology of religion

From Sea Monster to Dragon: An Introductory Philology of the Serpent

Within the vast repertoire of human imagination, certain symbols have always aroused astonishment and emotion, largely due to the profound religious significance they acquired across centuries and through the many socio-cultural transformations in which they played a central role.

Some of these symbols, while preserving their essential characteristics, have assumed markedly varied—sometimes even opposing—meanings, shifting and acquiring different semiotic nuances depending on specific cultural contexts.

Among the most widespread symbols in the cultures of the Mediterranean basin is the Serpent. Over the centuries, it has taken on the appearance of a sea monster, Leviathan, cosmic adversary, but also bearer of knowledge, guardian of forbidden wisdom, and emblem of renewal and eternal life. Its importance is attested in alchemy, spirituality, historiography, and literature throughout the

Mediterranean, from the earliest stages of human society to, as we shall see, the contemporary world.

To reconstruct an effective analysis of how this symbol developed in the context of ancient history, the natural starting point is the Hebrew Bible.

The earliest biblical reference to Leviathan appears in Psalm 74, composed between 584 and 520 BCE, during the exilic period[1].

This was a catastrophic time, an age in which destruction reigned over the people of Israel. The tone of the Psalm reflects this sentiment, depicting a tragic scene in which divine intervention is invoked in remembrance of past victories:

"You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the *tannînim* in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan and gave him as food to the creatures of the desert […]."[2]

In addition to the context and the depiction of Leviathan as an aquatic monster subdued by YHWH and given as prey to the *siyyîm* of the desert, the typical parallelism of biblical poetry highlights a relationship between the name *Leviathan* and the Hebrew noun *tannînim*, which, for now, we may simply translate as "sea monsters."

The use of this term also establishes a noteworthy link to Genesis 1:21, where it is written:

"And God created great whales (*tannînim)*, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good."[3]

Concerning the nature of Leviathan, it is worth noting that Rashi of Troyes, in his commentary on Genesis, writes: "These are the great fish that are in the sea. According to the aggadah, the expression refers to Leviathan and its consort; God created them male and female, but then killed the female and preserved her in salt for the righteous in the world to come. For had they been able to reproduce, the world would not have endured."[4]

Leviathan is thus an aquatic monster whose nature places it in direct opposition to YHWH—a motif recurring throughout the cosmogonies of the ancient Mediterranean, as we shall explore in the opening chapters of this study.

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[1] A. Angelini, *Dal Leviatano al Drago: mostri marini e zoologia antica tra Grecia e Levante*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2018, p.22

[2] Salmo 74, tr. it. a cura di Diodati [1991] as reported by A. Angelini, *Dal Leviatano al Drago: mostri marini e zoologia antica tra Grecia e Levante*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2018, p.22. English translation by the author.

[3] A.A.V.V., *The Bible*, Genesis 1,21, en. Translation by https://www.wordproject.org/bibles/kj/01/1.htm. The hebrew noun is added by the author.

[4] Rashi of Troyes, *quoted text,* available in English on https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.1.21?lang=bi&with=Rashi&lang2=en

A further reference appears in Isaiah 27. Here, the text no longer recounts past or present calamity, but rather prophesies a distant future—hence why these chapters are often described as the "Apocalypse of Isaiah." The eschatological vision culminates in the slaying of Leviathan by YHWH: "In that day the LORD with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea"[5].

In this passage, Leviathan's death acquires explicit soteriological and eschatological significance.

The temporal expression *bayôm hahû* ("on that day") establishes an intriguing connection with Job 3:6–10, where Job, in despair, curses the night of his birth: "As for that night, let darkness seize upon it; let it not be joined unto the days of the year, let it not come into the number of the months. Lo, let that night be solitary, let no joyful voice come therein. Let them curse it that curse the day, who are ready to raise up their mourning. Let the stars of the twilight thereof be dark; let it look for light, but have none; neither let it see the dawning of the day: Because it shut not up the doors of my mother's womb, nor hid sorrow from mine eyes."[6]

Some interpreters emend *yôm* ("day") to *yām* ("sea"), drawing on Late Antique Aramaic magical formulations concerning Leviathan and Yam found on incantation bowls[7].

There is little doubt that, from a zoological standpoint, the morphological features attributed to Leviathan oscillate between serpentine and ichthyomorphic traits.

From a lexical point of view, we have already noted how the noun *tannîn* is used, in the biblical context of the Old Testament, to indicate generically the "sea monster." In order to resolve the morphological mystery of Leviathan, therefore, it is worthwhile to resolve the lexical analysis of this term, taking as an example *Exodus* 7, where the term is employed to describe the transformation of Moses' staff: "When Pharaoh shall speak unto you, saying, Shew a miracle (*mophet*) for you: then thou shalt say unto Aaron, Take thy rod, and cast it before Pharaoh, and it shall become a serpent. And Moses and Aaron went in unto Pharaoh, and they did so as the LORD had commanded: and Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh, and before his servants, and it became a serpent. (tannîn)."[8]

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[5] A.A.V.V., *The Bible*, Isaiah 27,1,

[6] A.A.V.V., *The Bible*, Job 3, 6-10

[7] O. Wikander, *Cosmological Snake-Charming and Leviathanic Panic in an Ancient Near Eastern Setting,* in «Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft» vol. 122, pp. 265-271

[8] A.A.V.V.., *The Bible*, Exodus 7, 9-10

Moses and Aaron therefore went to Pharaoh and carried out what the Lord had commanded them: Aaron threw his staff before Pharaoh and his ministers, and it became a serpent.

Two facts are noteworthy in this passage: first, the use of the term *mophet* (prodigy) in relation to the appearance of the serpent, a theme that, as we shall later see, is common in Iliadic poetry; secondly, the translation of the noun *tannîn* as "serpent." This translation would be supported by the fact that in *Exodus* 4 the same miracle is performed by YHWH, and there, regarding the transformation of the staff, the Hebrew term used to describe the serpent is *nahaš*.

That this is an extraordinary manifestation is further confirmed not only by the already mentioned term *mophet*, but also by the root shared by the noun *nahaš* and the verb *niheš* ("to divine").

In the following verses, particularly from 10 to 12, we read: "Then Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers: now the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments. For they cast down every man his rod, and they became serpents: but Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods."[9]

Of these verses, the behavior of Aaron's *tannîn*, which swallows the *tannînim* produced by the enchantments of the Egyptian sorcerers, must certainly be emphasized. As we shall show, this characteristic recurs in the description of *Leviathan* and of the other sea monsters, so much so that it often becomes their main descriptive feature. In relation to this, in Jeremiah 51: "Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon hath devoured me, he hath crushed me, he hath made me an empty vessel, he hath swallowed me up like a dragon (*tannîn*), he hath filled his belly with my delicates, he hath cast me out."[10]

Once again, therefore, the *tannîn* is characterized by the act of swallowing. The passages cited in this analysis, however, do not clarify the difficult nature of the *tannîn*, as it is positioned both in the sea and on land.

The major dictionaries of Biblical Hebrew propose two distinct lexemes: *tannîn* (masc. sing.), with the plural form *tannînim* (sea monster, serpent, or reptile), and a singular *tan* attested only in the masc. plural *tannîm* and once in the fem. plural *tannōt*. Apart from etymology, a morphological clarification of Leviathan, and therefore, by extension, of the entire class of *tannînim*, may be found in the book of Job. "Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook? or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down? Canst thou put an hook into his nose? or bore his jaw through with a thorn? Will he make many supplications unto thee? will he speak soft words unto thee? Will he make a covenant with thee? wilt thou take him for a servant for ever? Wilt thou play with him as with a

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9 A.A.V.V., *The Bible*, Exodus 7, 11-12

10 A.A.V.V., *The Bible*, Jeremiah 51, 34

bird? or wilt thou bind him for thy maidens? Shall the companions make a banquet of him? shall they part him among the merchants? Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons? or his head with fish spears? Lay thine hand upon him, remember the battle, do no more. Behold, the hope of him is in vain: shall not one be cast down even at the sight of him? None is so fierce that dare stir him up: who then is able to stand before me? Who hath prevented me, that I should repay him? whatsoever is under the whole heaven is mine. I will not conceal his parts, nor his power, nor his comely proportion. Who can discover the face of his garment? or who can come to him with his double bridle? Who can open the doors of his face? his teeth are terrible round about. His scales are his pride, shut up together as with a close seal. One is so near to another, that no air can come between them. They are joined one to another, they stick together, that they cannot be sundered. By his neesings a light doth shine, and his eyes are like the eyelids of the morning. Out of his mouth go burning lamps, and sparks of fire leap out. Out of his nostrils goeth smoke, as out of a seething pot or caldron. His breath kindleth coals, and a flame goeth out of his mouth. In his neck remaineth strength, and sorrow is turned into joy before him".[11]

And again: "When he raiseth up himself, the mighty are afraid: by reason of breakings they purify themselves. The sword of him that layeth at him cannot hold: the spear, the dart, nor the habergeon. He esteemeth iron as straw, and brass as rotten wood. The arrow cannot make him flee: slingstones are turned with him into stubble. Darts are counted as stubble: he laugheth at the shaking of a spear. Sharp stones are under him: he spreadeth sharp pointed things upon the mire. He maketh the deep to boil like a pot: he maketh the sea like a pot of ointment. He maketh a path to shine after him; one would think the deep to be hoary. Upon earth there is not his like, who is made without fear. He beholdeth all high things: he is a king over all the children of pride."[12]

The description of Leviathan—both in extent and precision—is certainly unique in the Bible. Leviathan is thus introduced as an immovable, mighty being, capable of making the earth tremble with all its creatures and of dominating all beings of the waters. A terrible mythological creature with very few connections to the known animal world.

Nevertheless, some medieval commentators proposed zoological interpretations of Leviathan and Behemoth (the latter omitted here for narrative convenience), such as that offered by Samuel Bochart: "Probatur Behemot Job. 40, 10 non esse elephantem, ut volunt, sed hippopotamus […]. Leviathanis nomine non significari balaenam, sed crocodilum […]»[13]

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[11] A.A.V.V., *The Bible*, Job 41, 1-22

[12] ibid., vv. 25-34

[13] S. Bochart, *Hierozoicon, sive bipartitum opus de animalibus Sacrae Scripturae,* 1712, pp.15-16.

Thanks to the book of Job and to cryptozoological interpretations, it is now perhaps easier to define the morphology of Leviathan, and therefore of the *tannînim*, as serpentiform beings, terrifying, often set in contrast with the cosmic order as antagonists, as we shall see, of the celestial deities.

Sea Monsters

Although we have in some measure highlighted the connection that the noun *tannîn* possesses with the concept of serpentiformity, we cannot forget the marine aspect of these monsters, and therefore the importance that this element has in the narration and description of these beings.

In the complex world of fantastical zoology, a separate category must perhaps be dedicated to sea monsters[14]. These beings, whose morphology is varied and whose appearances are mythical, are grouped, in Greek, under the term *kêtos*. The nature of these beings oscillates between *ichthys* (fish) and *thēr* (beast), eluding all taxonomic and zoological classification.

The Latin correspondent of *kêtos* (plural *kētē*) is *cetus*, no less difficult to classify and describe, being used both for mythical beings and for existing animals.

The category of *kētē* may thus be applied "to the actual massive denizens of the deep, principally whales, and to the fantastical predatory sea-serpents of myth."[15]

This lexical ambiguity allowed Oppian to classify the *kētē* within the realm of the prodigious and the terrifying (*pélōr*)[16]: "Sea monsters with great limbs, prodigious, marvels of the sea."[17]

Other authors, on the other hand, prefer to use the Latin correspondent of *thēría* (beasts), namely *belua*, to underscore the monstrous nature of these beings. It is Pliny himself who employs this kind of monstrous synecdoche, supported by a famous passage of Servius: "cetos, id est beluam marinam"[18].

There is no doubt that, if we were to identify a recurrent trait of the *kētē*, we would find it in their devouring disposition[19]. Both in Hebrew culture and in Greek mythology, the *kêtos* is an instrument of divine wrath, sent to devour human beings as punishment or vengeance. How could one fail to

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14 A. Zucker, *Étude epistémologique du mot kêtos,* in S. Mellet (a cura di), *Les zoonymes. Actes du colloque international tenu à Nice le 23,24,25 Janvier 1997,* Nice, Centre de Recherches Comparatives sur les langues de la Méditerranée ancienne, pp. 425-454

15 D. Ogden, *Drākon: dragon myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 116

16 A. Angelini, *Dal Leviatano al Drago: mostri marini e zoologia antica tra Grecia e Levante*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2018, p.116

17 Oppiano, *La pesca*, 1,360. English translation by the author.

18 Servio, *Commento all'Eneide* 3,3

19 A. Angelini, *Dal Leviatano al Drago: mostri marini e zoologia antica tra Grecia e Levante*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2018, p.117

mention, in this regard, the events of the myth of Heracles, Hesione, and the *kêtos*. Following an act of betrayal, Apollo sends the *kêtos* against the Trojans, who find themselves compelled to sacrifice their daughters to appease the monster's hunger. Heracles' intervention in defense of Hesione finally leads to the killing of the monster through a rather interesting strategy. Heracles allows himself to be swallowed by the *kêtos*, where he remains for three days in its belly.[20]

The mythologeme of the virgin-devouring *kêtos* is common, as noted, throughout the Mediterranean area and likely draws its origins from certain ceramic representations dated between 575 and 550 BCE.

At this point of our analysis, it is interesting to attempt to understand the connections that this type of myths has with the biblical account of Jonah.

The representation we have of Jonah is probably among the strangest provided for the biblical prophets; so strange that, in fact, some have noted that his behavior is almost parodic[21].

In addition to this, it must be emphasized that the story of Jonah constitutes the narrative epitome of swallowing, having become famous thanks to Judeo-Christian tradition. In this story, however, the *kêtos* is not merely a monstrous being and instrument of divine vengeance, but is resemanticized as a true instrument of salvation. The belly of the *kêtos* is in fact named *mesûlâ tehôm*, elsewhere used to describe *Sheol*, the underworld of the Hebrew tradition. In addition to this, the verb that describes Jonah's falling asleep on the ship (i.e. *yarkâh*) is used elsewhere to indicate the descent into the deepest place of the earth, namely *Sheol*[22]. The descent into the belly of the *kêtos* assumes in this context a soteriological value, being a *sēmeîon* of the death and resurrection of Christ[23].

This particular interpretation of the act of swallowing would finally be attested also by certain posthumous representations of the events of Jonah, in which the prophet is depicted naked, almost as if he were a newborn.

Another point on which, perhaps, it is worth placing emphasis is the interpretative nature that can be linked to this swallowing. A clear example of this is the midrashic interpretation of the events of Jonah provided by Rabbi Eliezer, where we read: "The two eyes of the fish were like two windows of obsidian and gave light. A pearl was hanging in the entrails of the fish and gave light, and Jonah

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20 D. Ogden, *Drākon: dragon myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 118

21 A. Angelini, *Dal Leviatano al Drago: mostri marini e zoologia antica tra Grecia e Levante*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2018, p.122

22 ibid. p.124

23 A.A.V.V., The Bible, Matthew 12,38-41

saw everything that was in the seas and in the depths."[24]

The swallowing is here compared to entering a synagogue, thus becoming a privileged means for obtaining knowledge[25]. In the same text, moreover, we read: "The fish said to Jonah: 'Do you not know that the day has come when I must be devoured by the throat of Leviathan?' He replied: 'Bring me to him and I will deliver both myself and you from his throat.' Immediately it brought him to Leviathan. And Jonah said to Leviathan: 'Leviathan, it is for you that I have descended to the bottom of the waters to see the place of your dwelling; for I am destined to fasten a rope to your tongue and I shall draw you out to prepare you for the great banquet of the righteous' […]. Leviathan looked at him and immediately fled before Jonah a distance of two days' journey. Jonah said to the fish: 'Behold, I have saved you from the mouth of Leviathan; make known to me in return all the mysteries of the sea and its depths.'"[26]

It seems, here, that the events of Jonah intertwine—at least thematically—with a more classical conception of the serpent as custodian of knowledge and forbidden wisdom. It is interesting, in this regard, to note how the biblical text evolves in its conception of the *kētē* as the Mediterranean becomes a receptacle for different cultures, religions, and traditions.

The Book of Jonah, in fact, is placed by scholars in a period later than the one in which it is set. Although the actual date of its composition is still debated, scholars are more or less in agreement in not placing it before the 5th century BCE, a time when the Mediterranean was dominated by the first great thalassocracies. The Mediterranean, in these centuries, was the natural limit of expansion for the great empires[27], among which it is impossible to forget the great Persian empire, which brought the entire eastern Mediterranean to its knees until the final clash with Greek civilization, following the ascent to the throne of King Xerxes in 486 BCE.

About a century earlier, the people of Israel also underwent a great conquest carried out by the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar. The great Babylonian exile brought around 3023 families into deportation in 599 BCE, followed by another 832 and finally 745 in 582 BCE[28].

In a climate characterized by great migrations, exiles, wars, trade, and socio-cultural upheavals, we should therefore not be surprised if some major mythic or religious themes became intertwined, producing significant modifications that later emerged in the written texts of this historical period.

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24 Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer 10, another en. translation available on https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_DeRabbi_Eliezer.10.1?lang=bi&with=Commentary ConnectionsList&lang2=en

25 A. Angelini, *Dal Leviatano al Drago: mostri marini e zoologia antica tra Grecia e Levante*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2018, p.129

26 Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer 10

27 D. Abulafia, *Il grande Mare: storia del mediterraneo*, Oscar Mondadori, Milano 2016, p. 138sgg.

28 G. Filoramo (a cura di), Ebraismo, Laterza, Bari 2021, p.54

Naturally, even today the dating of the Book of Jonah is a subject of academic debate, and the brief historical outline presented here may only be a plausible hypothesis of the semiotic blending to which the symbolism of the *kêtos* was subjected.

Another particularly interesting midrash reveals a dispute between two *kētē* over which of them would have the task of swallowing the prophet Jonah. They therefore went to Leviathan, who told them that he alone knew the truth, because it had been transmitted to him directly by God during the last three hours of the day, when the two were accustomed to play together.[29]

This interpretation would refer to Psalm 104, where it is revealed that in the last three hours of the day, after watching over the world, God descends into the depths to relax by playing with Leviathan.

These accounts are interesting for our narrative not only because they reveal a profound relationship between the *kêtos* and divine wisdom, but especially because they tend to subvert the classical interpretation of what, in this following sections of this paper, we shall define as *Chaoskampf*, that is, the battle between serpentiform monsters and the celestial deities. These midrashic stories reveal the absence of conflict and instead place the *kêtos* beside God, as His intimate friend and guardian of the world's wisdom.

From *kêtos* to *drākon*: the role of Christianity in the late ancient world

We have already had occasion to note how the descriptions concerning the *kētē* are varied and confused, outlining a true polymorphism of these beings, so intimately connected with the Abyss, mysterious and obscure by definition.

Over the centuries, however, representations of the *kêtos* became increasingly specific, depicting a long serpentine tail attached to a large ichthyomorphic body.[30]

It is precisely this polymorphism that constitutes the key representative element not only of the monster but especially of the sea itself, unfathomable and multiform[31]. As we shall see, in attempting to delineate an analysis of serpentiformity, these characteristics are shared by the *kêtos* with serpents, the symbol *par excellence* of polyvalence and mystery.

However, this evolution was not sudden, but rather proceeded through different stages of transformation that, over the centuries, allowed the imaginary of the sea monster to be transformed into that of the serpent.

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29 Midrash on Jonah 2, 6 as reported by A. Angelini, *Dal Leviatano al Drago: mostri marini e zoologia antica tra Grecia e Levante*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2018, p. 132

30 A. Angelini, *Dal Leviatano al Drago: mostri marini e zoologia antica tra Grecia e Levante*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2018, p.152

31 ibid. p.155

A key role in this respect was played by the translations of the Bible from Hebrew into Greek and from Greek into Latin, where the term *tannîn* was rendered in various ways. In particular, in Job: "Am I a sea, or a whale, that thou settest a watch over me?"[32] the noun *tannîn* was translated in the Septuagint as *drákōn*, later revised by Aquila into *kêtos*, just as Jerome replaced the Latin *draco* with the term *cetus*, for a more literal translation faithful to the original Hebrew.

However, this ambiguity of translation conveys the idea of the interchangeability of the ancient terms for "serpent" and "sea monster," giving us a unique philological picture. It is therefore worthwhile to analyse the category of the *drákontes* in order to identify which traits they share with the category of the *kētē*.

This category is fundamentally absent in the ancient world, where we find only one possible counterpart of "draconian" creatures: Leviathan. And yet, as noted, Leviathan is such a peculiar being as to be unique, assuming an ever greater individuality compared to all the other *tannînim* found in the narratives of the Mediterranean[33].

The medieval dragon does not exist in the ancient world, where instead we find a multiplicity of serpentiform beings and monsters, with different meanings and peculiar morphologies. Something, therefore, must have changed in the way these beings were imagined in late antiquity, thus favouring the emergence of the dragon as we picture it today in the Middle Ages. This major transformation is Christianity.

The turning point can perhaps be identified in the Apocalypse of John, where the noun *drákōn* is directly associated with the *diabolós*. It is here that Christianity begins to interpret the relationship between the *tannînim* and God as a true *Chaoskampf*, perhaps importing from other Mediterranean cultures this ancient dualistic vision of the world and introducing it into the doctrinal apparatus which, in turn, had been inherited from Judaism.

The dragon begins here to be separated also from the serpent, which nevertheless retains some positive characteristics. In patristic tradition, where every animal was in some way a representation of *oppositae qualitates*—that is, of an intrinsic dualism—the *draco* in some way constitutes an exception, remaining anchored as a symbol of what was becoming defined as the Adversary.

It is evident, in these first centuries of Christian ascent, the preference for the term *drákon* over the more famous *ophis* of the Greek world, which instead is almost forgotten. Supporting this philological thesis is also the proposal of Bishop Theophilus who, in the 2nd century, proposed an etymology for *drākon* from the verb *dérkomai* ("to gaze fixedly") in contrast to the typical gaze of

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32 A.A.V.V., *The Bible*, Job 7,12

33 A. Angelini, *Dal Leviatano al Drago: mostri marini e zoologia antica tra Grecia e Levante*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2018, p.166

serpents, proposing also a connection with the verb *apodidráskō* ("to flee") in reference to a passage of the book of Job: "The demon (*daimōn*) is also called *drákōn* because he has deserted (*dià tò apodedrakénai*) God: for at the beginning he was indeed an angel."[34]

In conclusion, we may therefore affirm that the semantic and semiotic evolution from *tannîn* to *drákōn* occurred only in late antiquity, certainly after the rise of Christianity and after the earliest patristic interpretations and biblical translations from Hebrew into Greek and from Greek into Latin. It was precisely in this period that, on the one hand, the Greek term *drákōn* came to be preferred over all the other lexemes analysed here to designate the serpent—or at least what in Hebrew was called *tannîn*—while on the other hand symbolic representations of these beings began to be blended, favoured also by the emergence—and, we may say, the invention—of "Satan."

Before proceeding, however, into late antiquity and the medieval period, it is appropriate to take a necessary step back in history to analyse all the other lexemes designating the serpent and the literary motifs in which they were prominent in the eastern Mediterranean before the rise of the Roman world. During this journey through ancient Greek and Egyptian mythology and literature, we shall find clarity in certain foundational myths that present the serpent as their undisputed protagonist, helping us to outline its fundamental characteristics and cosmic function in the cultural landscape of the time.

Analysis of Serpentiformity in the Greek Mode

The *leitmotiv* of the serpent is, without any doubt, one of those red threads that can be found in every corner of the earth and in every moment of history, thanks above all to its extraordinary capacity to convey meanings and to exert a hold on the collective human imagination. Indeed, the serpent owes its popularity in the history of religions also and above all to the versatility of the meaning it bears, at times becoming a positive symbol of rebirth and fidelity, at other times a negative symbol of betrayal and wickedness.[35]

There is, however, no doubt that the identification between the religious symbol of the serpent and the ontological concept of Evil is very late and geographically circumscribed in comparison with the traditions examined here, unquestionably going back to Semitic–Jewish culture.

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34 Theophilus, *Ad Autolico* 2,28

35 B. Mundkur, *The Cult of the Serpent: an interdisciplinary survey of its manifestations and origins* (1983)

To analyse the theme of the serpent from a different angle than that provided by current "Satanisms"[36] or, more generally, by the religions belonging to the so-called left-hand path is useful to the scholar not only for understanding its motif and its history, but also for becoming aware of the powerful hold that a cult such as Ophidism can potentially have on the human soul.

This work is therefore situated within a very specific cultural context and derives its usefulness precisely from the general confusion that reigns regarding the subject of its object.

In order to bring to the reader's attention how Ophidism, as a cultuality of the Serpent, is not only the contemporary declension of a hiatus that separates the knowable from the unknowable within the human soul and has tormented it for millennia, but also probably one of the most ancient cultic forms in human history, we shall first examine the studies of the Lithuanian archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, and subsequently the Greek occurrences of the term "serpent" identified by the philological work of Maria Lucia Sancassano[37], in order to arrive—finally—at a direct analysis of the ancient sources, among which Hesiod and Plutarch will naturally stand out.

The Serpent in the Paleolithic

The studies of Marija Gimbutas[38] are located, geographically, in the stratified archaeological site of Çatalhöyük, in the region of Anatolia, where the archaeologist discovered an interesting sequence in the iconographies connected with the Mother Goddess, later diffused throughout the Mediterranean basin and in central and northern Europe in various forms and declensions. The centrality of these studies allows the scholar or the mere enthusiast of the history of religions to understand the common historical origin of the idea concealed behind the cult of the Great Mother, which over the centuries found favour in all (or almost all) the religious and cultic forms of the Western and Middle Eastern area.

In particular, Gimbutas showed how, already from the Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic, it is possible to discern the emergence of a female divine figure whose presence was manifested by the inscription of certain graphic signs (chevron and V) on objects connected with her cult. This female figure, according to the archaeologist, could be designated as "Bird Goddess" because of the prominence that birds had within the rock artistic compositions of that epoch[39].

In short, the first form of human divinity in the Middle Eastern area would be precisely a Bird Goddess, linked indeed to the idea of fertility, but also to the symbolism bound up with birds. For

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36 For an academic study of Satanis: M. Introvigne, *I Satanisti: storia, riti e miti del satanismo*, Sguardo Edizioni, Milano 2010

37 M. L. Sancassano, *Il Serpente e le sue immagini,* Edizioni New Press*,* Como 1997

38 M. Gimbutas, *Il Linguaggio della Dea* (1989), Venexia 2008

39 ibid. p.3 sgg.

example, some figurines found at Mal'ta in Siberia are marked with the V, the graphic sign *par excellence* of the pubic triangle. Similarly to what was found at Mezin in Ukraine, these figurines—sometimes completely ornithomorphic, other times anthropomorphic but with a bird's tail—present very precise graphic motifs marking their belonging to a specific primordial cult common to the whole European area. To understand the importance that such figurines had in the religious life of the time, it is enough to look at their dating: we are around 18,000–15,000 BCE, an epoch in which the interconnection between the graphic sign of the V as a synthetic representation of the pubic triangle as generator of life and the above-mentioned ornithomorphic Goddess was already evident.

In the immediately subsequent stage, it is natural that these graphic signs passed from anthropomorphic figurines of a religious character to ceramics and to ritual objects used within the cult: in this specific case, it should be noted that the occurrence of the chevron and V sign was an explicit declaration that the object in question belonged to the cult of the Goddess and thus to religious life.

The Bird Goddess is not only the premise of the Serpent Goddess, which we shall examine shortly and which constitutes *de facto* the necessary antecedent to all conceptions of the reptile present in the cults of the Mediterranean basin, but is also a symbol of a binomial that we shall find again in classical literature: that of bird–reptile or, in some specific cases, eagle–serpent.[40]

Naturally, we are aware that the Bird Goddess was not necessarily represented as an eagle, but for the purposes of our discussion this fact has no impact at all. There are, in fact, numerous cases of literary metaphors in Greek metre and prose in which the occurrence of the serpent is accompanied by the presence of various species of birds and not necessarily of the eagle in particular. This would demonstrate that in the collective imagination of the peoples of the Mediterranean basin there existed a correlation—if not theological, at least symbolic—between the beings of the sky (i.e. birds) and the beings of the earth (i.e. serpents), whose relationship varies from culture to culture and according to the historical period under consideration.

Despite some notable variations, it is possible for the scholar to delineate the symbolic function of the serpent in different cultures, also and above all thanks to the relationship that it maintains with its uranic counterpart. Since the serpent is in fact a controversial and at times contradictory symbol, it would not be possible to outline effectively its function in the human imaginary and in the ensemble of different religious beliefs, were one not to begin with an examination of the relationship it entertains with its sworn enemy. In this, as we shall see, Iliadic metre will come to our aid.

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[40] M. L. Sancassano, *Il Serpente e le sue immagini,* Edizioni New Press, Como 1997, pp. 9-10

To understand the Bird Goddess means to understand where the typically human conviction originated that there exists a correlation between beings of the sky and chthonic beings, as well as to understand that it is precisely through this same correlation that it is possible to analyse the motif of the serpent and to understand why it is so fundamental for human beings. Thus, if we look at the cult of the Bird Goddess, it will be inevitable to see an evolution towards other zoomorphic divine forms, among which we shall inevitably find the theriomorphic form of the Serpent Goddess.

The first sauromorphic or serpentine occurrence in terms of graphic representations—a motif that we find as early as the time of *Homo neanderthalensis* (ca. 40,000 BCE)—is that of the zigzag[41], symbolically referring to the element of water and to the same Bird Goddess mentioned just above. It is not surprising that we do not yet witness the emergence of an autonomous serpentiform divine figure: the serpent, before being associated with any divinity, required several millennia of fermentation within the human imaginary, and it is precisely for this reason that, although the zigzag may symbolically recall the reptile that is the object of this treatise, it would acquire its own autonomy only relatively late in comparison with the symbol of the bird.
Already from the Upper Paleolithic, the zigzag was associated with anthropomorphic images of bird, fish, and phallus. The interrelation between the zigzag motif and the water element can be observed above all in certain archaeological finds from ancient Europe in Magdalenian times, where the zigzag was associated with the M motif, alluding to uterine figures and consequently to amniotic fluid[42]. Water, therefore, was not understood as a natural element that gives life, but rather as intrauterine fluid through which the generation of all living beings becomes possible. We should thus not be surprised that this divine figure later became the "Great Mother" we know today.

The emergence of the meander as a serpentiform symbol dates back, however, to the Paleolithic: if at first it was used as a graphic reference to the amniotic element, it was only from this historical moment that the serpent made its appearance in sacred representations. At times the meander symbol is accompanied at one of its extremities by an unmistakable sauromorphic head, a sign that the imaginary of the Bird Goddess was about to change into something very different and much more articulated. In this first phase, we must say for clarity's sake, the meander—although it had acquired a serpentiform shape—had not yet achieved a graphic autonomy and was therefore associated with the zigzag and with other graphic forms referring to the cult of the Bird Goddess; it was thus represented beneath the Goddess's neck or on the posterior, similarly to a tail. It is evident,

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41 M. Gimbutas, *Il Linguaggio della Dea* (1989), Venexia 2008, pp. 19-20

42 ibid. p.19

if one takes into account the correlation between meander, serpent, and bird, that the element of the Goddess was water, understood as life-generating liquid and not, once again, as a natural element.

The passage to an autonomy of the meander occurs together with the development of the tri-line symbol, associated with the idea of becoming because it is often placed within whirlpool-like representations. The tri-line is therefore the first true graphic sign of the Serpent Goddess as an autonomous deity. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that the idea of the Bird Goddess was abandoned with the birth of the Serpent Goddess; the two figures, in fact, seem to have coexisted, since the former was considered the generator of life, whereas the latter was associated with the motif of evolution, of becoming, and of change.

Some plates from the Karanovo and Cucuteni cultures could be fundamental in identifying the tri-line with the serpent, as they would reveal a correlation between this graphic sign and the reptile under examination. Another point on which it would be worth pausing with regard to the serpent represented as tri-line is precisely the symbolic value of the number three. This divine triplicity is a particularly fertile idea in many cultures, and a triple goddess would later find her fortune in the cult of Hecate and, in more recent times, in neo-pagan cults. The number three, then, is identified as a symbol of change and evolution, clearly referring to the most famous phenomenon that characterizes the reptile: shedding.

The serpent, by changing its skin, appeared to the ancients as an immortal being, capable of evolving and being reborn each time with a new skin. This symbolism, which would later be adopted in later cults in the Mediterranean basin, would be one of the main reasons why certain meanings were associated in the collective religious imaginary with this animal. It should therefore be emphasized that the serpent was not in antiquity considered a treacherous and evil being, but a bearer of rebirth and evolution, a positive and auspicious symbol. Even today, in some regions of Eastern Europe, finding a serpent beneath one's house is a sign of an imminent birth, confirming once again the relation that this symbol has with the concept of fertility.

The number three, sacred *par excellence*, gave rise, besides the already mentioned Hecate, to the Greek Moirai, the Roman Parcae, the Germanic Norns, the triple Brigid of Ireland, and countless other triple and feminine divine forms that remained in human cultualities up to (and at times beyond) the rise of Christianity in the West.

Proof that the serpent was not perceived as an evil or deceitful animal comes from a later myth, particularly of the Akkadian period, known as the Myth of Etana, of which we report one version:

On the crown of the tree the eagle begets,
at the base of the styrax-tree begets the serpent

In the shade of that styrax-tree

the eagle and the serpent formed a friendship

taking the oath to remain companions.

The desire of their hearts

they expounded to each other.

After his young had grown in age [and size]

[their] wings had ac[quired]

The eagle [plotted evil] in his heart:

"My young [have grown in age and size]

They will go forth to seek [...]

They will seek the plants [...]

Then i will devour the young of the serpent[43]

The Serpent in Iliadic Metre

The motif of the serpent is, without doubt, among the most heterogeneous in religious literature, partly because of the ambivalence of its meaning, partly because of the changing religious beliefs connected with this animal. No exception is made by the greatest Homeric work, the *Iliad*, in which the serpent is without doubt a symbolic protagonist of some importance. In this text, the animal appears nine times: twice in Book 2 (B), once in 3 (Γ) and in 6 (Z), twice in 12 (Λ) and in 13 (M), and once in 24 (X). The Greek terms used to denote this animal are mainly three, although there is also another which, as we shall see, is used especially in the case of the Pythia of Delphi connected with Apolline cultuality. In order of occurrences: δράκων, which appears seven times, ὄφις, used as its synonym, and ὕδρος. All these terms constitute the foundations of this reptile's presence in the Iliadic epic poem; a presence which is, from time to time, enriched with adjectives and with more or less detailed descriptions, among which the description of its colour stands out without any doubt. For if, during the Paleolithic, the colours with which serpents were represented could be the vehicle of positive rather than negative meanings, in Iliadic metre we find one colour that is more recurrent than the others: φοινήεντα[44].

Whereas therefore in prehistoric times black was used as a symbol of fertility, white as a symbol of death, and red as a symbol of vitality and violence, in Iliadic metre it appears that the δράκων

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43 *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament (ANET),* ed. J.B. Pritchard, Princeton 1969 p. 114 sgg.

44 Homer, *Iliad*, M v.202: litterally «reddish as blood», similar to the description in B, where the serpent was called Δαφοινός.

φοινήεντα is described thus for a very specific reason, which we shall see in the examination of the τέρας of Aulis in Book 2, where the function of the serpent begins to be revealed to the reader.
In spite of the ambiguity of its meaning, then, the Iliadic δράκων has, in the narrative, a precise function both from a literal point of view and from a sacred/symbolic one, being, as we shall see, a symbol both of terror and vengeance and of neutrality. In fact, as we have already had occasion to see in our analysis, the serpent was not perceived in Greece as a being that necessarily bore a negative or positive meaning, but rather as a neutral animal whose function could adapt to take on the role of "violent animal" or "defenceless animal," depending on the case.
Once again, it is worth underlining that the analysis of the serpent as an autonomous motif is almost completely impossible precisely because of its apparent contradictoriness: it becomes possible only to the extent that one considers the uranic or terrestrial counterpart of the animal; a counterpart which, as we have already seen, often belongs to the world of birds and, just as frequently in the case of the *Iliad*, to that of terrestrial animals.

χθιζά τε καὶ πρωΐζ' ὅτ' ἐς Αὐλίδα νῆες Ἀχαιῶν
ἠγερέθοντο κακὰ Πριάμῳ καὶ Τρωσὶ φέρουσαι,
ἡμεῖς δ' ἀμφὶ περὶ κρήνην ἱεροὺς κατὰ βωμοὺς
ἕρδομεν ἀθανάτοισι τελήεσσας ἑκατόμβας
καλῇ ὑπὸ πλατανίστῳ ὅθεν ῥέεν ἁγλαὸν ὕδωρ·
ἔνθ' ἐφάνη μέγα σῆμα· δράκων ἐπὶ νῶτα δαφοινὸς, , τόν ῥ' αὐτὸς Ὀλύμπιος ἦκε φόως δέ,
βωμοῦ ὑπαΐξας πρός ῥα πλατάνιστον ὄρουσεν.
ἔνθα δ' ἔσαν στρουθοῖο νεοσσοί, νήπια τέκνα,
ὄζῳ ἐπ' ἀκροτάτῳ πετάλοις ὑποπεπτηῶτες
ὀκτώ, ἀτὰρ μήτηρ ἐνάτη ἦν ἣ τέκε τέκνα·
ἔνθ' ὅ γε τοὺς ἐλεεινὰ κατήσθιε τετριγῶτας·
μήτηρ δ' ἀμφεποτᾶτο ὀδυρομένη φίλα τέκνα·
τὴν δ' ἐλελιξάμενος πτέρυγος λάβεν ἀμφιαχυῖαν.
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ κατὰ τέκνα φάγε στρουθοῖο καὶ αὐτήν,
τὸν μὲν ἀρίζηλον θῆκεν θεὸς ὅς περ ἔφηνε·
λᾶαν γάρ μιν ἔθηκε Κρόνου πάϊς ἀγκυλομήτεω·
ἡμεῖς δ' ἑσταότες θαυμάζομεν οἷον ἐτύχθη.
ὡς οὖν δεινὰ πέλωρα θεῶν εἰσῆλθ' ἑκατόμβας,
Κάλχας δ' αὐτίκ' ἔπειτα θεοπροπέων ἀγόρευε·
τίπτ' ἄνεῳ ἐγένεσθε κάρη κομόωντες Ἀχαιοί;
ἡμῖν μὲν τόδ' ἔφηνε τέρας μέγα μητίετα Ζεὺς

ὄψιμον ὀψιτέλεστον, ὅου κλέος οὔ ποτ' ὀλεῖται.
ὡς οὗτος κατὰ τέκνα φάγε στρουθοῖο καὶ αὐτὴν
ὀκτώ, ἀτὰρ μήτηρ ἐνάτη ἦν ἣ τέκε τέκνα,
ὣς ἡμεῖς τοσσαῦτ' ἔτεα πτολεμίξομεν αὖθι,
τῷ δεκάτῳ δὲ πόλιν αἱρήσομεν εὐρυάγυιαν.
κεῖνος τὼς ἀγόρευε· τὰ δὴ νῦν πάντα τελεῖται.
ἀλλ' ἄγε μίμνετε πάντες ἐϋκνήμιδες Ἀχαιοὶ
αὐτοῦ εἰς ὅ κεν ἄστυ μέγα Πριάμοιο ἕλωμεν.

“It was on the next day or the day after, when at Aulis the ships of the Danaans gathered, bringing evil to Priam and the Trojans. And we, around a spring, near the sacred altars, were offering to the immortals perfect hecatombs, under a fair plane tree from which clear water flowed. And there a great sign appeared: a serpent, scarlet along its back, a terror, which indeed the Olympian himself brought to light, leaping from beneath the altar it rushed toward the plane tree. There was a nest of sparrows, tender little creatures, on the topmost branch, hidden beneath the leaves, eight, and the ninth was the mother who had borne the little ones; and the serpent devoured the young, pitifully chirping; and the mother flew around, lamenting her little ones; it coils, springs, and seizes her by the wing as she cries. But when it had swallowed the sparrow’s nestlings and her as well, the god who had revealed it made it into something most manifest: for the son of Cronus of the crooked counsel suddenly turned it into stone. And we stood there in amazement at what had happened: thus the gods’ dreadful portents interrupted the hecatomb. But at once Calchas began to proclaim the divine interpretation: ‘Why do you remain silent, long-haired Achaeans? To us wise Zeus has shown this great portent, late, slow to be fulfilled, but its fame shall never perish. As this one devoured the sparrow’s young and her as well, eight, and the mother was the ninth who bore the little ones, so we shall fight for just so many years, and in the tenth we shall take the wide-wayed city.’ Thus he spoke, and now all is being fulfilled. So remain here, all of you, well-greaved Achaeans, until we take the great citadel of Priam.”[45]

In the verses examined in this passage, several details emerge concerning the motif of the serpent that cannot be ignored in our analysis. First of all, we notice how the serpent has been Ὀλύμπιος ἦκε φόως δέ, and that therefore, precisely by virtue of this, it has been interpreted by the seer Calchas as an omen, a τέρας indeed. The Olympian has sent the serpent, which is described with a series of highly important adjectives: first and foremost ἐπὶ νῶτα δαφοινὸς, which once again

[45] Homer, *Iliad*, B vv.302-332 English translation by the author.

emphasizes the "scarlet" coloration, but also σμερδαλέος, which we can translate as "fearsome" or "terrifying," and which helps to give a very specific connotation to the animal sent by Zeus.
As we were saying, however, these adjectivations are not sufficient in themselves to delineate the function of the serpent in Greek thought, and it is in fact precisely through the presence of the στρουθοῖο (eight nestlings plus the mother) that the pro-active function of the serpent is manifested in this passage of the *Iliad*. The presence of the sparrows not only gives meaning to the serpent's action, but also allows the son of Cronus to send a sign that can be interpreted by means of the seer.
According to some scholia on the text, as reported by M. Lucia Sancassano, the number of sparrows is not only directly proportional to the number of years that will be necessary for the Achaeans to conquer the sacred citadel of Ilion, but is also a sign of the connection between these animals and the goddess Aphrodite. Being indeed numerous, these animals could be considered a symbol of fertility. In truth, there is no proof of this correlation, nor that, where the στρουθοῖο can be connected to Aphrodite, the δράκων can be associated with the goddess Athena. Although this interpretation provided by the *scholia* does not seem convincing, it nevertheless remains suggestive in view of the recurrence of this double binomial within Iliadic metre.

We cannot, once again, fail to underline the presence of birds alongside that of the serpent, as though the bird–reptile binomial were something indispensable for the understanding of the latter. This opposition is also found in the case of the prodigy/omen in Book 13 (M), during the Trojan counterattack near the long ships of the Achaeans.

ὄρνις γάρ σφιν ἐπῆλθε περησέμεναι μεμαῶσιν
αἰετὸς ὑψιπέτης ἐπ' ἀριστερὰ λαὸν ἐέργων
φοινήεντα δράκοντα φέρων ὀνύχεσσι πέλωρον
ζωὸν ἔτ' ἀσπαίροντα, καὶ οὔ πω λήθετο χάρμης,
κόψε γὰρ αὐτὸν ἔχοντα κατὰ στῆθος παρὰ δειρὴν
ἰδνωθεὶς ὀπίσω· ὃ δ' ἀπὸ ἕθεν ἧκε χαμᾶζε
ἀλγήσας ὀδύνῃσι, μέσῳ δ' ἐνὶ κάββαλ' ὁμίλῳ,
αὐτὸς δὲ κλάγξας πέτετο πνοιῇς ἀνέμοιο.

"Then there came to them a bird, as they strove to cross over, an eagle of lofty flight that, on the left, shut off the host, bearing in its talons a blood-red serpent, monstrous, still alive and writhing; nor had it yet forgotten the fight, but struck the bird that held it, in the breast, near the neck, bending

backward; and she flung it away from herself to the ground, torn with pain, she cast it into the midst of the throng, while she, crying aloud, flew off on the blasts of the wind."[46]

This too, as in the case of the τέρας at Aulis in Book 2, is nothing less than a sign from Zeus, prophesied to men on the battlefield through the mediation of the eagle–serpent binomial.
At first, therefore, the Trojans, inflamed by the desire for revenge, interpret the eagle's temporary dominance over the serpent as a sign of their imminent victory. But then the serpent καὶ οὔ πω λήθετο χάρμης and, with a bite, rebels against the grip of the bird, causing immense pain to its adversary and being cast down to the ground.
What thus appeared to be an imminent sign of Trojan victory becomes, in an instant, the sign of the Achaeans' resistance, who, despite Achilles' absence from the battle, manage to drive back their opponents.
Here the serpent becomes a symbol no longer of terror (indeed, it is not described with the adjective σμερδαλέος), but rather a symbol of dangerousness and daring: just like the Achaeans, who seemed taken by surprise by the Trojan attack yet managed to withstand it by regrouping, the serpent, with a single bite, freed itself from the eagle's grasp. It would seem obvious to identify in the bird favoured by Zeus, as the Trojans indeed did, the sign of the god's favour; yet, strikingly, it is the reptile—once again—that becomes the vehicle of the τέρας and thus the undisputed protagonist of the metaphor. Once again, the serpent is πέλωρον, blood-red.
What then can be said of the serpent in the Homeric imaginary of Iliadic metre?
Beyond its apparent contradictoriness, which emerges only at a superficial reading, the warlike and at the same time sacred role of the serpent is instead evident, a role which makes it a perfect animal for expressing Zeus' will. The warlike function of the reptile is highlighted by the recurrence of the semantic field of χάρμης, almost as a constant device associated with each manifestation of the animal. With this analysis, there emerges an extremely vivid imaginary in which the serpent is indeed an animal to be feared for its dangerousness and unpredictability, but also a sacred animal, a vehicle of divine wisdom and an agent of the Olympian's favour.
We cannot fail to mention, in this regard, the almost apotropaic function that serpentiform representations have in the case of the descriptions of Agamemnon's armour and weapons in Book 11, where we read:

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[46] Homer, *Iliad*, M vv.200-207, english translation by the author

κυάνεοι δὲ δράκοντες ὀρωρέχατο προτὶ δειρὴν
τρεῖς ἑκάτερθ' ἴρισσιν ἐοικότες, ἅς τε Κρονίων
ἐν νέφεϊ στήριξε, τέρας μερόπων ἀνθρώπων.

"and toward the neck leapt dark-blue serpents, three on each side, like rainbows which the son of Cronus fixes in the cloud, a portent for mortal men."[47]
And again:

τῇ δ' ἐπὶ μὲν Γοργὼ βλοσυρῶπις ἐστεφάνωτο
δεινὸν δερκομένη, περὶ δὲ Δεῖμός τε Φόβος τε.

"and upon it the Gorgon grim of aspect was set as a crown, gazing terribly, and around her were Terror and Rout."[48]

Although in these two verses the serpent is not explicitly mentioned, the reference to the sauromorphic form typical of the Gorgon clearly seems evident, since, as we shall see when analysing Hesiod's *Theogony*, she is represented either as entirely serpentiform or with serpents as hair. One should rather note, as Catling[49] did, that in the description of Agamemnon's armour there are evident artistic influences typical of ancient Egypt. Below is the description of Tutankhamun's cuirass provided by the scholar:
«Im Zentrum ist innerhalb des Rahmes der geflügelte "Kheper"-Käfer dargestellt, der die Sonnenscheibe trägt. Daneben sehen wir die Krallen und den Schwanz des Sonnenfalkes mit Symbolen des Lebens. Die ganze Komposition wird von zwei Uräusschlangen flankiert, von denen die eine die weiße Krone Oberägyptens und die andere die rote Krone Unterägyptens trägt, von diesen hängen die Symbole des Lebens herab.»[50]
Indeed, then, the serpent motif forms part of Egyptian sacred representations and is a *leitmotiv* of apotropaic art for warlike and funerary purposes.
Such is the case of Uraeus, serpent of the sun and of fire, but also symbol of pharaonic kingship and authority.

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47 Homer, *Iliad*, 11,26-28, english translation by the author

48 ibid. vv.36 sgg.

49 H. W. Catling, *Archaelogia Homerica*, Göttingen 1977

50 ibid. pp.93 sgg.

The presence of the serpent in Egyptian art can be dated as far back as 4000 BCE, with the creation of the S-shaped hieroglyph[51].

This parallel—which might perhaps appear daring—is in reality the necessary premise for the later identification of certain Greek divinities with their Egyptian counterparts, as in the case of Typhon and Seth. Although, therefore, it is still premature at this stage of history to speak of a possible cultic interrelation between the two lands, it is certainly less bold to suppose a mutual cultural influence of the one upon the other, at least in the field of artistic representations.

The verb ὀρωρέχατο in v. 26 of Book 11 is linked—as in the case of the term χάρμης—to a very specific warlike function. Its semantic sphere is in fact that of the impetus a warrior takes before hurling himself into combat and battle, a further confirmation that the serpent upon Agamemnon's armour was not only an apotropaic symbol to ward off death, but also and above all a means of terrifying his enemies.

Hesiodic Sauromorphism

Very far from the Iliadic descriptions is Hesiod, author of the famous *Theogony*, in which a detailed account is given of the birth of the gods and of other mythological figures of importance in the Hellenic pantheon. Here too there are several serpentiform occurrences in all of Hesiod's works—eighteen in detail—and the terms that designate them are of four types: ὄφις (8 times), δράκων (7 times), ἔχιδνα (2 times), and ὕδρος (1 time). In the specific case of the *Theogony* we have the greatest concentration of occurrences of these terms: four times the term ὄφις, three times δράκων, twice ἔχιδνα, and once ὕδρος. Of these, eight occurrences are contained between vv. 297 and 334.

Whereas in Iliadic metre the serpent had a neutral function as bearer of Zeus' τέρας, in Hesiod's verses it is always accompanied by terrifying descriptions of monsters, their parents, and their progeny. That something happened at a cultural level, bringing about such a radical change in the collective imaginary of the serpent, is truly unlikely if we consider the few decades of temporal gap between the two works. It is more probable, instead, to imagine that the two visions coexisted for a long time and began to emerge over the centuries, gradually separating and placing themselves more and more at opposite poles.

Naturally, it is not possible for us to know exactly what happened in Western humankind's conception of the serpent, but it would probably not be incorrect to discern in this change of paradigm also a Semitic influence, spread throughout the Mediterranean basin precisely after the 6th century BCE.

What is certain, as far as Hesiod's *Theogony* is concerned, is that although the serpent was now seen

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51 cfr. E. M. Ciampini, *La lingua dell'antico Egitto*, Hoepli, Milano 2018

as something exclusively terrifying and fearsome, it had not yet been relegated solely to the chthonic spheres of the supernatural world. That is to say, despite an almost entirely negative connotation, "serpentiformity" was still a characteristic of divinities with a central role. This is the case, for example, of ἔχιδνα and Typhon, or of the Gorgon Medusa, or again of the serpent guarding the garden of the golden apples.
In short, despite this change of paradigm, the serpent does not lose its mythological or symbolic centrality and continues to be a focal point for the entire cultic context of the Mediterranean basin.

As we have seen, Hesiodic sauromorphism is concentrated in about forty verses of the *Theogony* and, in particular, in those verses that describe the generations of monsters born from the union of Phorcys and Ceto, children of Gaia.
It should certainly be noted that, with a progressive increase in the number of Gaia's descendants, there is also a progressive abandonment of the anthropomorphic aspect in favour of a more sauromorphic one. This means, of course, that Phorcys and Ceto had nothing of the terrifying aspect that Typhon and ἔχιδνα would later have, or that the very famous Hydra would have, represented entirely in serpent form.
Special mention must be made of the Gorgons and in particular of Medusa, who is described thus in the depiction of Heracles' shield:

"From their belts hung two serpents with curved heads: they flicked their tongues and sharpened their teeth in anger, glaring terribly. And upon their horrid Gorgonean heads a great terror shook."[52]

This description might appear to be at odds with the classic representation of Medusa as an anthropomorphic being with serpents in place of hair, but in reality it points to a specific evolution of the same divine being, who was probably represented in archaic times in a very different way from how she was later conceived. Some scholars indeed maintain that Medusa may originally have been described as a being more serpentiform than anthropomorphic, and that only later did she abandon her sauromorphism in favour of a more human representation. Whatever the truth about the Gorgon's real form, this Hesiodic description seems to find confirmation in certain representations of Corinthian–Attic art, particularly in the pediment of the temple of Artemis at Corcyra.
If we look at the text of the *Scutum*, examined just above in its Italian translation, we should note the use of a specific adjective to describe Medusa's typical sauromorphism:

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[52]Esiodo, *Lo scudo di Eracle* vv. 233-237, tr. it. di C.F. Russo, in "Hesiodi Scutum", Firenze 1950. Translated in english by the author.

ἐπὶ δὲ ζώνῃσι δράκοντε
δοιὼ ἀπῃωρεῦντ' ἐπικυρτώοντε κάρηνα·
λίχμαζον δ' ἄρα τώ γε, μένει δ' ἐχάρασσον ὀδόντας
ἄγρια δερκομένω· ἐπὶ δὲ δεινοῖσι καρήνοις
Γοργείοις ἐδονεῖτο μέγας φόβος.[53]

The interesting expression is clearly μέγας φόβος, literally translatable as "great fear," and which cannot fail to recalls the Homeric conception that we have already glimpsed in the analysis of Iliadic metre. There the serpent was indeed an animal that bore terror and fear for the enemy.
How can we fail to notice, moreover, the use of the same term already encountered in the description of Agamemnon's armour? Φόβος and its semantic field are in fact repeated in both works and always in connection with Medusa's sauromorphism, allowing us to intuit that, whatever its declension and form, it remained in any case a terrifying and fearsome element, capable of striking terror into enemies in battle (in the case of Agamemnon's armour), but also into the heroes who dared to challenge the divinity (in Medusa's specific case).
Without detracting from Medusa's centrality in Greek mythology, it is perhaps only with ἔχιδνα that the theme of the serpent finds its fullest expression, this time in the text of the *Theogony* itself:

ἡ δ' ἔτεκ' ἄλλο πέλωρον ἀμήχανον, οὐδὲν ἐοικὸς
θνητοῖς ἀνθρώποις οὐδ' ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι,
σπῆι ἔνι γλαφυρῷ, θείην κρατερόφρον' Ἔχιδναν,
ἥμισυ μὲν νύμφην ἐλικώπιδα καλλιπάρηον,
ἥμισυ δ' αὖτε πέλωρον ὄφιν δεινόν τε μέγαν τε
αἰόλον ὠμηστήν, ζαθέης ὑπὸ κεύθεσι γαίης.
ἔνθα δέ οἱ σπέος ἐστὶ κάτω κοίλῃ ὑπὸ πέτρῃ
τηλοῦ ἀπ' ἀθανάτων τε θεῶν θνητῶν τ' ἀνθρώπων,
ἔνθ' ἄρα οἱ δάσσαντο θεοὶ κλυτὰ δώματα ναίειν.
ἡ δ' ἔρυτ' εἰν Ἀρίμοισιν ὑπὸ χθόνα λυγρὴ Ἔχιδνα,
ἀθάνατος νύμφη καὶ ἀγήραος ἤματα πάντα.

"She bore another monster, impossible to withstand, in nothing like mortal men nor like the immortal gods, in a hollow cave, the divine Echidna of steadfast heart, half nymph with glancing eyes and fair cheeks, and half again a monstrous serpent, terrible and great, swift, bloodthirsty,

53 Hesiod, Heracle's Sputum, vv.233-237

beneath the secret places of the holy earth. There she has her cavern below a hollow rock, far from the immortal gods and mortal men; there the gods assigned to her to dwell in her glorious home. And in the land of the Arimi, under the earth, dwells ruinous Echidna, an immortal nymph and ever young for all days."[54]

The description of Echidna presented here is interesting from several perspectives, both philological and religious. First of all, we cannot refrain from highlighting the use of the adjective πέλωρον, used also to describe Gaia herself, the divine being *par excellence* of Greek mythology. Despite the fact that Echidna thus retains rather marked and monstrous serpentine traits and, despite the fact that she dwells in the cavities of the earth, far from gods and humans, the use of the adjective πέλωρον in her description nonetheless assigns her to the divine sphere, allowing her to possess characteristics that, as we shall see, will be crucial. The adjective in question not only connects Echidna to the progenitrix Gaia, but also places her in a sphere of unreachability and remote divinity.

There is no doubt that, in the physical description, explicitly positive adjectives (i.e. καλλιπάρηον) accompany the anthropomorphic part of the Goddess, while negative adjectives accompany the serpentiform part. In the description of Echidna's sauromorphism, it is indeed said: πέλωρον ὄφιν δεινόν τε μέγαν τε αἰόλον ὠμηστήν, ζαθέης ὑπὸ κεύθεσι γαίης.

It is thus clear here that the adjectival pair μέγαν and αἰόλον serves to delineate the movement of the ὄφιν and does not in itself express evil or negative characteristics, but that such characteristics are adjectivized by means of certain specific terms in the same description[55].

We have already discussed the term πέλωρον which, by its reference to divinity, places Echidna in a remote and subterranean sphere in relation to human beings; and also δεινόν, which we have already encountered in Iliadic metre and which literally means "terror" or "awe." Thus, with this very brief description Hesiod manages to provide us with an extremely functional characterization of Echidna, thanks to the precise use of adjectives and terms employed for narrative purposes.

It is also interesting to note, with regard to Echidna, two further elements: first, the repeated use of terms that refer to the subterranean or chthonic life of the serpent; second, the explicit use of the adjective ἀθάνατος in the final lines of the verses considered.

In the first case, the systematic and repeated use of a semantic sphere referring to subterranean life can only be connected to Echidna's serpentiformity. But in truth, even the use of the adjective πέλωρον which, by its presence, abstracts the entire figure of Echidna into an intangible and

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54 Hesiod, Theogony, vv.295-305. English translation by the author

55 M. L. Sancassano, *Il serpente e le sue immagini,* Edizioni New Press, Como 1997, p. 61sgg.

imperceptible divine conception, could be linked to the repetition of terms indicating the underworld. Echidna is indeed relegated to the recesses of caves, far from gods and men, in a place where no one can reach her because of her terrible form and fearsome fury. There, in the depths of the Earth, where man does not dare to explore and where the gods are forgetful of their creation, Echidna crawls and lives, together with her companion Typhon, a terrible and monstrous life.
The second term to be noted is, as said, ἀθάνατος, used in the Greek language to denote the gods. Echidna, then, is not only πέλωρον, but also ἀθάνατος, and it is for this reason that her figure is central for understanding the role of the serpent in Hesiodic literature. In fact, Echidna and her companion Typhon represent the synthesis of all the human conceptions of the age concerning this animal: a frightening animal, certainly, terrifying and doubtless dangerous, but also divine.
It begins to take shape, as we shall later see also in late Egyptian literature, a centrality of the role of the serpent, almost as if this animal had "learned," over the centuries, to make itself necessary to every form of human cultuality.

Κητὼ δ' ὁπλότατον Φόρκυι φιλότητι μιγεῖσα
γείνατο δεινὸν ὄφιν, ὃς ἐρεμνῆς κεύθεσι γαίης
πείρασιν ἐν μεγάλοις παγχρύσεα μῆλα φυλάσσει.

"Ceto, having been joined in love to Phorcys, bore as her youngest child a terrible serpent, who in the recesses of the dark earth, at the great boundaries, keeps watch over the golden apples"[56]

In these verses we are presented with the last of the children of the first generation of monsters, a δεινὸν ὄφιν whose task is to have custody of the "golden apples."
For this reason, the last son of Phorcys and Ceto is called the Serpent of the Hesperides, precisely because he is set to guard Hera's mythical garden where the hero Heracles had to gather one of these apples, deceiving the giant Atlas for fear of confronting this terrible serpent. Indisputably, therefore, this great serpent is located in the West, at the extreme boundaries of the world, exactly where the Gorgon had also been placed a few verses earlier. Remarkably, Echidna is instead placed in the East, and in the verses dedicated to her there is no adjectival expression connected with the West or with that Ocean which, in Hesiod's imaginary, is indeed the symbol of the West.
What immediately stands out about this serpent is the absence of even a vague anthropomorphic characterization, in line with what was said at the beginning of this section about the progressive abandonment of human traits as the generations and offspring increase. The terrifying aura of danger that surrounds this monster, intimately connected with the Daughters of Night, places the Serpent of the Hesperides in a very different position, for example, from the sacred serpent of the

[56] Hesiod, Theogony, vv.333-335. English translation by the author

Erechtheion[57]. It should be noted, however, that the serpent is often used in Greek mythology as a guardian animal of inaccessible sacred places and, if at times human beings show great respect for this animal, at other times they show themselves to be terribly frightened by it and incapable of doing anything in its presence.

The Serpent of the Hesperides, then, like the serpent of Colchis guarding the Golden Fleece, or the guardian serpent of the sanctuary of Chryse on Lesbos described by Philoctetes[58], is the guardian of a secret, a secret which—with all probability—is precisely that connected with the birth and death of things. Thus the serpent, terrifying and fearsome, is perceived by the Greek as also the guardian of something inviolable and sacred. The Serpent of the Hesperides cannot but recall the serpent guarding the tree of life in the Sumerian–Akkadian mythology: is-balati grows at the boundaries of the world and is guarded by a serpentiform being, Gis-zi-da, the serpent-man. This serpent-man is not, however, a δεινὸν ὄφιν, but in his characterization resembles more the serpent of the Erechtheion, a benevolent being to whom the faithful turned to ask for the prolonging of their lives and other not dissimilar "graces."

The Serpent of the Hesperides is instead, like Echidna, relegated to an undefined and unreachable underworld and is, in its greatness and in its terrifying appearance, an infinite and unknowable being, with whom not even Heracles had the courage to measure himself.

The companion of Echidna, Typhaon (or Typhon), is a serpentiform being of terrible appearance, described for the first time in vv. 306 and following of the Theogony.

δεινόν θ' ὑβριστήν τ' ἄνομόν θ' ἑλικώπιδι κούρῃ·
ἡ δ' ὑποκυσαμένη τέκετο κρατερόφρονα τέκνα[59].

The first thing we must note is the recurrence of the semantic sphere of violence. The mother of the second generation, Echidna, has in fact κρατερόφρονα τέκνα, while the father Typhon is ὑβριστήν, but also δεινόν. Indeed, the children of these two monsters will all be violent and terrible. We know them as Orthus, Cerberus, and Hydra.

It might seem strange to find two monsters (Orthus and Cerberus), traditionally represented as canids, in a study on mythological sauromorphism, and yet, as we shall see, these two mixed beings also have a strong connection with serpentiformity.

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57 cfr. M. L. Sancassano, *Il serpente e le sue immagini,* Edizioni New Press, Como 1997, p. 65

58 Philoctetes, *Sophocles*, v. 1623sgg.

59 Hesiod, *Theogony*, vv. 306-307

Orthus, Geryon's dog, is not directly described by Hesiod, but Apollodorus represents him as a two-headed dog with a serpent's tail, probably an allusion to the representation of Cerberus.

δεύτερον αὖτις ἔτικτεν ἀμήχανον, οὔ τι φατειόν,
Κέρβερον ὠμηστήν, Ἀίδεω κύνα χαλκεόφωνον,
πεντηκοντακέφαλον, ἀναιδέα τε κρατερόν τε

"The second, in turn, she bore was invincible, not to be spoken of, Cerberus, cruel, Hades' dog with the bronze voice, fifty-headed, shameless and strong."[60]

The connection that most immediately stands out between Cerberus and Orthus and their parents is certainly polycephaly; Cerberus is in fact described as κρατερόν, but also as ἀμήχανον and ὠμηστήν, invincible and cruel, characteristics which are an evident echo, as said, of that semantic sphere of violence already presented to us in vv. 306–307 in the introduction to the father Typhon.
Although it therefore seems that there is no room for serpentine traits in this description, there is literary evidence that Cerberus may originally have been a serpent and not a dog. Indeed, the Scholiast of the Theogony[61] himself says: "some said that Cerberus had the appearance of a serpent, others that of a dog; he is called κύνα, in fact, as the guardian of the chthonic beings."
A fragment of a papyrus summarized by Pausanias[62] seems further to confirm the thesis that originally Cerberus was a serpentiform being and not a theromorphic one.
In *Un frammento papiraceo di Ecateo Milesio*, Tibiletti[63] observes that Cerberus appears exactly as an ὄφις. The canine aspect of Cerberus would, in all probability, be the result of later elaborations of his description and of the term κύνα which, originally, did not mean "dog," but rather "guardian."
The third-born child of Typhon and Echidna is Hydra, a monster whose serpentine nature is beyond question, since the sources speak of it in quite accurate terms:

τὸ τρίτον Ὕδρην αὖτις ἐγείνατο λύγρ' εἰδυῖαν
Λερναίην, ἣν θρέψε θεὰ λευκώλενος Ἥρη
ἄπλητον κοτέουσα βίῃ Ἡρακληείῃ.
καὶ τὴν μὲν Διὸς υἱὸς ἐνήρατο νηλέι χαλκῷ
Ἀμφιτρυωνιάδης σὺν ἀρηιφίλῳ Ἰολάῳ
Ἡρακλέης βουλῇσιν Ἀθηναίης ἀγελείης·

60 Hesiod, *Theogony*, vv. 310-312. English translation by the author.

61 L. Di Gregorio, *Sulla tradizione manoscritta degli "Scholia Vetera" alla "Teogonia" di Esiodo*, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano 1975, p. 59

62 Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 3.25.5

63 G. Tibiletti, *quoted opera*, in Athenaeum 33 n.s. 1995, pp.345-350

"Third she bore the Lernaean Hydra, who knows baneful things: her the goddess Hera of the white arms reared, implacable, inflamed with anger against the mighty Heracles; and her the son of Zeus killed with pitiless bronze, the Amphitryonid, together with Iolaus who loves Ares, Heracles thanks to the counsels of Athena the leader."[64]

Although in this passage a negative connotation of the monstrous being does not emerge directly, a later passage by Virgil[65] may help us to understand its nature better:

est etiam ille malus Calabris in saltibus anguis
squamea convolvens sublato pectore terga
atque notis longam maculosus grandibus alvum,
qui, dum amnes ulli rumpuntur fontibus et dum
vere madent udo terrae ac pluvialibus Austris,
stagna colit ripisque habitans hic piscibus atram
improbus ingluviem ranisque loquacibus explet;
postquam exusta palus, terraeque ardore dehiscunt,
exsilit in siccum et flammantia lumina torquens
saevit agris asperque siti atque exterritus aestu.

Once again, the Serpent (whatever its particular declension in the morphology of the monsters) seems to delineate itself in the ancient imaginary as guardian of a hidden and inaccessible world, custodian of unspeakable secrets and, only sometimes, as direct antagonist of the Hero.
But perhaps the most curious element of the description of Hesiod's Theogony is the association between serpentiform beings and the goddess Hera, in view of the Athena–Hero binomial. We had already seen, in the case of Iliadic metre, a similar juxtaposition in the case of the τέρας of Aulis in Book 2, where some scholars had proposed forming a sparrows–Aphrodite and serpent–Athena binomial. If, however, in the first case there was no evidence to support this identification, in this specific case such a binomial is explicitly mentioned by the author of the Theogony and thus seems worthy of analysis. Homer, in the Hymn to Apollo, even cites her as the mother of Typhon, consort of Echidna. Hera therefore is often placed, according to various sources, with a retrospective gaze toward the past, making use, in her fits of anger, of primordial divinities and serpentiform monsters

64 Hesiod, *Theogony*, vv. 313-318. English translation by the author.

65 Virgil, *Georgics*, 3 vv.425-434

as her emissaries[66]. Athena, on the other hand, more forward-looking, gives her support to the heroes, the new gods.

This symbolic opposition delineates a very precise theological conception concerning the two deities, where the one is presented as more inclined to vengeance and arrogance, while the other is described as calm and calculating.

On the other hand, where an enmity between Athena and the Serpent might appear, this is not actually the case: the goddess herself shares numerous traits with the reptile, to the point that some scholars have hypothesized a primitive sauromorphic morphology for her. Quoting Poetscher:

«Wie die Schlange im Hause die Vorraete huetet und sie zu verteidigen scheint, wie sie den Titen raepresentiert und mit der Erde, auf der sie kriecht und deren Fruechte sie bewacht, verbunden ist, so ist auch Athene die schuetzende Goettin des Hauses und seiner Bewohner (der lebenden gleichermassen wie der toten, welche in den ηρωες, weiterwirkend leben) und des Stueckchen Landes, auf dem man lebt. Unter ihrem Schutz steht die γαια πατρις , der roemischen (terra) patria vergleichbar, in der man sein Haus hat, eben in jenem Stueck Erde, das schon die Vaeter bewohnt haben. Sie ruhen ja im Schosse der Erde als Gaeanten fuer den Segen ihres Genos und als unabdingliche Verpflichtung zu geradem Recht».[67]

“Athena therefore entertains a close relationship with the Serpent, but only with the positive symbolisms of this animal. She is thus bound to rebirth and vitality, but also to the idea of the Serpent as an animal that is a vehicle of wisdom and divine knowledge.”

Within Hesiod’s Theogony, however, the most important serpentiform being is undoubtedly the already mentioned Typhon, Echidna’s companion, a polycephalous monster with sauromorphic appearance. Although there are numerous philological debates on the monster’s double name, what is interesting to note is the adoption of this figure, from Plutarch onwards, also in late Egyptian mythology. In fact, Typhon came to replace Seth in the Isiac mysteries of the Hellenistic age and entered mythology as the killer of Osiris.

οὗ χεῖρες μὲν ἔασιν ἐπ' ἰσχύι ἔργματ' ἔχουσαι,
καὶ πόδες ἀκάματοι κρατεροῦ θεοῦ· ἐκ δέ οἱ ὤμων
ἦν ἑκατὸν κεφαλαὶ ὄφιος δεινοῖο δράκοντος,
γλώσσῃσι δνοφερῇσι λελιχμότες· ἐν δέ οἱ ὄσσε

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66 cfr. M. L. Sancassano, *Il serpente e le sue immagini,* Edizioni New Press, Como 1997, p. 71sgg.

67 W. Poetscher, *Athene*, in Gymnasium 70 1963, p.404

θεσπεσίῃς κεφαλῇσιν ὑπ' ὀφρύσι πῦρ ἀμάρυσσεν·
[πασέων δ' ἐκ κεφαλέων πῦρ καίετο δερκομένοιο·

In this monstrous description, we do not have one, but two occurrences of the Greek term designating the serpent, ὄφιος and δράκοντος, both designating the same physical characteristic. The repetition of this term serves not only to underline Typhon's serpentiformity, but also to exacerbate his terrifying aspect and to delineate a figure that would then pass into history. The expression κρατεροῦ θεοῦ is entirely similar to how Echidna had been defined, thus referring also in Typhon's case to a divine and not merely monstrous nature. But whereas Echidna crawled through the caverns and the underworld, Typhon's hundred heads rise toward the sky in challenge to Zeus. The Typhonomachy, which according to some scholars would be a clumsy copy of the more famous Titanomachy[68], is however a theme not to be underestimated in the whole of the Greek imaginary linked to the serpent. For the first time, the Serpent is associated not only with states of terror and fear, but also with the concept of challenge. Typhon challenges Zeus, as Seth did with Osiris and as, rather metaphorically, Satan did with YHWH."

In analysing the notion of opposition between serpentiform divinities and solar/celestial divinities, we therefore cannot avoid considering the mythological antecedents of other cultures and identifying a *leitmotiv* that links the majority of human mythologies: a motif in which, inevitably, the serpentine divinity rebels against or challenges the solar one.
In the case of the struggle of Ulikummi in the Hurrian–Hittite myth, Kumarbi creates a serpentine monster in order to challenge the younger god who had usurped him. Ulikummi would thus be an eastern Typhon, just as we also have serpentine doubles in the case of the Hittite myth of Illuyankas and in the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*[69]. Illuyankas is the serpent against whom the celestial god wages war, while in the *Enuma Elish* it is Tiamat who represents the serpentine counterpart of Marduk. These parallels are in no way intended to suggest the possibility of syncretism between the different cultures, but rather an underlying symbolism common to various societies of the same area and a series of mutual influences which, over time and through various transformations, led to the emergence of the myth of Typhon and thus to the Typhonomachy.
The first to carry out a true syncretism, specifically between Typhon and Seth, was however Herodotus, followed by Plutarch, of whom we quote a passage in full.

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68 cfr. M. L. Sancassano, Il serpente e le sue immagini, Edizioni New Press, Como 1997, p. 77sgg.

69 W. Porzig, *Jlluyankas und Typhon*, in Kleinasiatische Forschungen 1 1930, pp. 379-386 and J. Bottéro/S.N. Kramer, *Lorsque les dieux faisaient l'homme. Mythologie Mésopotamienne.* Paris 1989, pp.602-679

“While Osiris was elsewhere, Typhon undertook no subversive action, thanks to the excellent vigilance and watchful firmness of Isis. But when Osiris returned, Typhon plotted against him. He had assembled a group of seventy-two conspirators and had also gained the complicity of the queen of Ethiopia, named Aso, who was present there. Typhon secretly took the measurements of Osiris’ body and had a chest prepared that corresponded to them in size, splendid and magnificently adorned, and had it brought into the banquet hall. At the sight of it, the guests were pleased and admired it, and Typhon, with the air of wanting to jest, promised to give the chest to whoever, lying inside it, matched its dimensions. One after another, all the guests tried. Since there was no one of suitable size, Osiris entered and lay down in it. The conspirators then rushed forward, slammed down the lid, fastened it from the outside with nails, and then poured molten lead over it. They carried the chest to the river and abandoned it toward the sea, through the Tanitic mouth, which for this reason the Egyptians even today call ‘hateful and detestable.’ It is said that these events took place on the seventeenth of Athyr, the month in which the sun passes through Scorpio, in the twenty-eighth year of the reign of Osiris.

As soon as she realized what had happened, Isis cut off one of her braids and put on mourning garments at the place where the city that to this day bears the name of Coptos stands. Some believe that the toponym means ‘privation,’ since to express the act of depriving the Egyptians use the verb *koptein*. Isis wandered everywhere without accomplishing anything and without ceasing to question the people she encountered; even if she met children, she questioned them about the chest.

She eventually encountered someone who had seen it; he pointed out to her the river mouth through which Typhon’s allies had let the sarcophagus drift toward the sea. Isis discovered that Osiris, unknowingly, had united with her sister, believing her to be Isis. And she saw proof of this in the crown of melilot that Osiris had left to Nephthys; she began to search for the child (the mother, having just given birth, had immediately exposed him for fear of Typhon). Isis found him only with difficulty and effort, aided by the dogs that guided her; she raised him and made him a loyal guardian who accompanied her everywhere, and she gave him the name Anubis.

Isis learned that the waves had cast the coffin ashore near the region of Byblos. The tide had gently pushed it into a clump of heather. The heather, then, growing in a short time into a beautiful and vigorous plant, covered the coffin and, entwining it with its branches, concealed it within. Astonished at the size of the shrub, the king of Byblos had the trunk cut, the trunk that was hiding within its hollow the container, and removed it from sight; he then had it made into a column to support the roof of the palace.

It is said that Isis learned of these events by divine inspiration of the rumor; she went to Byblos and, seated in tears by a spring, overwhelmed with grief, spoke to no one, but greeted warmly and

treated affectionately only the queen's maidservants, braided their hair, and from her body there wafted onto them a divine fragrance. When the queen saw her maidservants, she was seized with a strong desire for the hairstyle and the ambrosial perfume of the stranger's skin. And so Isis was summoned and, having become intimate with the queen, received from her the task of nurse to the young child.

Isis nursed the child and gave him her finger to suck instead of the breast; but at night she burned away the mortal part of his body; then she transformed herself into a swallow and flew around the column mourning until the queen, who had been keeping watch on her, seeing the infant wrapped in flames, cried out and deprived him of immortality. The goddess then revealed herself and asked for the column that supported the roof. Without the slightest effort she removed it and stripped off the surrounding branches of heather; she then wrapped it in a fine linen cloth, poured an ointment over it, and returned it to the king; and even today the inhabitants of Byblos venerate that trunk, which is kept in the sanctuary of Isis.

The goddess then threw herself upon the coffin and broke into such heartrending lamentations that the youngest of the king's sons died on the spot; she placed the coffin on a boat and sailed away, taking with her the other son, the eldest.

Having reached a deserted place, left alone, the goddess uncovered the coffin and, pressing cheek to cheek, embraced Osiris and wept. The child, silently, approached behind her and witnessed the scene. The goddess noticed; she turned and, filled with anger, struck him with a terrible gaze. The child, unable to withstand the fright, died.

Isis then set out again to reach her son Horus, who was being raised at Buto; as for the sarcophagus, she placed it in a solitary place. Typhon found it by chance while hunting at night in the moonlight and, recognizing the body, tore it into fourteen pieces and scattered them. When Isis learned of this, she searched and searched again, sailing through the marshes on a papyrus raft. For this reason, they say—either out of fear or out of reverence toward the goddess—that crocodiles do no harm to those who navigate on boats of papyrus […]"[70]

Firmicus Maternus also reports, in the *De errore profanarum religionum*, concerning this syncretism: «Isis soror est, Osyris frater, Tyson maritus. Is cum comperisset Isidem uxorem incestis fratris cupiditatibus esse corruptam, occidit Osyrim artuatimque lacerauit, et per omnes Nili fluminis ripas miseri corporis palpitantia membra proiecit. Isis repudiato Tyfone, ut et fratrem sepeliret et coniugem, adhibuit sibi Nephtum sorerem sociam et Anubem uenatorem, cui ideo

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[70] *Su Iside e Osiride,* tr. it. di Paolo Scarpi in *"*Le Religioni dei Misteri volume 2: Samotracia, Andania, Iside, Cibele e Attis, Mitraismo*",* Fondazione Valla 2002, pp. 181-185. English translation by the author.

caninum caput impositum est quia lacerato corporis partes artidicio canis uestigantis inuenit. Sic inuentum Osyrim Isis tradidit sepulturae. Fuerunt sane hi aput Aegyptum reges pariter ac tyranni, sed Osyris iustus praeter illud quod cum sorore commist, Tyfon furiosus, impotens ac superbus. Ideo ille colitur, iste uitatur. Haec est Isiaci sacri summa.»

«Isis is the sister, Osiris the brother, Typhon the husband. He, upon learning that his wife Isis had been corrupted by the incestuous desires of her brother, killed Osiris, tore his corpse to pieces and scattered the palpitating limbs of the wretched body along all the banks of the Nile. Isis, having repudiated Typhon, in order to bury the brother as well as the spouse, called upon her sister Nephthys as ally and upon the hunter Anubis, on whom was placed the head of a dog because he found the parts of the dismembered body thanks to the skill of a dog tracking traces. Thus having found Osiris, Isis entrusted him to burial. These people in Egypt were kings and tyrants alike, but Osiris was just, except for the sin he committed with his sister, whereas Typhon was frenzied, violent, and proud. For this reason, the former is venerated and the latter abhorred. These are the essential aspects of the Isiac rite.»[71]

It is therefore clear that, beginning with Herodotus, the identification between Seth and Typhon was so strong and complete that the two figures merged into a single "adversary," abhorred in cult and derided in myth.

Joining this binomial, to form a triad of serpentine divinities, is—according to the studies of Seippel, later taken up by Bonnet[72]—the god Baal-Saphon. The unification and syncretism are possible in this case by virtue of the influences that second-millennium BCE Syria experienced from Egyptian culture. Thus, if Baal-Saphon and Seth were probably syncretized around the second millennium, the identification with Typhon was slightly later, but once complete, it led to the creation of an impious serpentiform trinity, opposed to the solar gods and corresponding to other mythological figures found in various cultures of the Mediterranean basin.

It is therefore supposed that there existed an imaginary of a Serpent-God common to all humanity (or, at least, in this geographical area), or even that there once existed a Serpent-God worshipped in all the cultures examined and later expressed differently depending on the socio-cultural context of each. If so, the *leitmotiv* of the opposition Serpent-God/Sun-God would constitute a mythological narrative theme of fundamental importance.

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71 English translation by the author

72 C. Bonnet, *Typhon et Baal-Saphon,* in E. Lipinski (a.c. di): *Phoenicia and the east mediterranean in the first millennium B.C.,* Studia Phoenicia 5, Leuven 1987, pp. 101-143

It is right to maintain, without any doubt, that if these serpentiform divinities did not exist, it would be impossible to constitute a pantheon of uranic and solar divinities. Without the Serpent as premise, then, mythology would not be as we know it today.

Conclusion

The comparative and philological survey presented in this study suggests that serpent symbolism in the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds is neither marginal nor accidental. Rather, it constitutes a deep structural element of religious imagination, recurring across cultures as a symbol of cosmic tension, metamorphosis, sovereignty, knowledge, and divine otherness. From the Leviathanic chaos-monster to the chthonic guardians of Greek tradition, from the serpentine agents of divine wrath to the bearers of healing, the serpent emerges not as a simple emblem of threat or beneficence, but as the embodiment of a fundamental dialectic: that between order and dissolution, finitude and renewal, death and continuity.

In this sense, modern Ophidian theology—far from being an arbitrary reconstruction—may be seen as the contemporary rearticulation of a very ancient intuition: that the Serpent, in its polyvalent nature, expresses a primordial metaphysical principle. Its ambivalence is not a contradiction but a mode of unity; its capacity to shed the skin becomes a paradigm of transformation; its subterranean or maritime dwelling places represent the threshold between worlds; and its role as guardian, adversary, or revealer reflects the complexity of the human attempt to encounter the sacred.

The Ophidian Synodus therefore stands within a lineage that stretches across millennia, offering a renewed hermeneutic through which this ancient symbol may once again reveal its theological depth.